

## How the EU's partnership with Myanmar is furthering its goals in Southeast Asia



*In 2016, the EU agreed a 'Special Partnership for Democracy, Peace and Prosperity' with Myanmar. **Ludovica Marchi** assesses how the EU's engagement with Myanmar has furthered its goals in Southeast Asia. The partnership advanced several EU ambitions, boosting the EU's presence in the region, bolstering its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and enhancing the EU's role as an advocate of security policy cooperation.*

The EU's '**Special Partnership for Democracy, Peace and Prosperity**' with Myanmar was a major overture by the EU and its member states toward the Southeast Asian state. It was facilitated by Myanmar's former President Thein Sein's approach to reform before and during the aftermath of the country's **2011 elections**. The ensuing military-backed civilian government sought to drive the country towards transformation and democratic governance, a choice that was confirmed by the **2015 elections** and subsequent government. As the EU recognised that Myanmar had 'embarked upon a remarkable transition process' and launched a comprehensive restructuring agenda, it conceded a series of acknowledgements.

In the new political environment of reforming Myanmar, the EU gradually became fully involved in devising a policy of support and closer relations. Together with the member states, it discussed their **approach to Yangon**, and later, in 2016, their **vision for a stronger Europe and a connected Asia and South Asia**. Yet, in 2016, they also reflected on a **Special Partnership** as an EU strategy towards Myanmar, and engaged in taking decisions about how to build a solid relationship during the country's difficult transformation.



Burma, Myanmar's capital (public domain).

The EU promoted a policy that aimed to build up more security in Myanmar and Southeast Asia. It believes that security is based on shared interests, attaining peace, promoting democracy, and achieving prosperity. But by supporting the Partnership with Myanmar, might the EU have longed to further some of its own goals concerning the region? Potential benefits from the engagement with Myanmar include the possibility for the EU to enhance its authority and influence over the region, to strengthen its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and to advance its role as a supporter of security policy cooperation in Southeast Asia.

### **Seeking to enhance its authority or influence**

The EU aspires to achieve a successful transition toward consensual and fair governance in Myanmar and is keen to support Yangon's engagement. It made public several stances in the Special Partnership which convey a motivation to strengthen and expand the EU's authority in the area. Such a goal is manifested by underlining the EU's sponsoring of a positive example of transition to democratisation and reform of a country which is 'strategically important... within South East Asia and the wider Asia Pacific region'. It is, similarly, communicated by the expressed determination and 'interest in working with the new government' in a regional context, and also becomes apparent from the EU's stress on being at 'the forefront of the international community's re-engagement' with Myanmar.

### **Strengthening its relationship with ASEAN**

When the EU proposed that, with ASEAN, it sought to overcome several challenges that Myanmar had to face, the EU was reinforcing its influence within its own affairs with the Association. Myanmar's conditions were unlike those of its ASEAN fellows. Joining forces with the ASEAN group would contribute more strongly to the poverty alleviation of a country with the lowest life expectancy among the ASEAN member states. It was key to reversing the present situation of a state where less than one-third of the population has access to electricity.

Accordingly, within the Special Partnership, the EU agreed that, in order to hasten Myanmar's development transformation, an EU-ASEAN support programme was crucial. Such an endeavour envisaged a multi-layered set of measures, from trade reforms to the promotion of commerce, and essentially aimed to ease Myanmar's integration into the ASEAN Economic Community. With this combined EU-ASEAN action intending to create the basis for a better economy in Myanmar, the EU made clear its policy of engagement with ASEAN and confirmed its strong relationship with the group.

### **Advancing the EU's role as an advocate of security policy cooperation with Southeast Asia**

Revealing that 'a closer partnership' with Myanmar would 'help to advance the EU's strategic interests in the Asia Pacific region', the EU also indicated its interests. It explained in the Partnership policy that, with Myanmar's government re-setting its foreign orientations 'in a fast changing wider Asia Pacific' scenario, Myanmar was expected to preserve its diversification in its crucial dealings with China. The EU seems to believe that, as Myanmar would safeguard its national sovereignty and autonomy, it would protect its own security as well as of its surrounding area.

The EU reconnected to the security and defence-related responsibility that Myanmar has recently undertaken in the Asia-Pacific. The country's co-chairing with the EU of several support group meetings in the field of diplomacy and confidence building at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) marked Yangon's progress in contributing to the security of its neighbourhood.

As the defender of safekeeping and wellbeing, the EU committed to the continuation of its diplomatic and political endeavours within the ARF framework. There, networking with Myanmar

was a vocation that the EU newly reaffirmed as an obligation. By guaranteeing to undertake the responsibility and task of cooperating with Myanmar at the ASEAN Regional Forum on subjects inherent to security, the EU appeared to strengthen its own position as a supporter and proponent of security policy cooperation with Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, the EU's goal of enhancing its authority or influence in the region became clear when it presented itself as a lead actor in engaging with Myanmar, and in sponsoring a positive example of transition to democratisation and reform. Moreover, its goal of re-confirming its attachment to ASEAN materialised with the EU's endorsement of a joint programme supporting Myanmar's integration into the ASEAN Economic Community. Lastly, the goal of enhancing its role as an advocate of security policy cooperation with Southeast Asia was underscored by the EU's ensuring of assistance to Yangon within the ASEAN Regional Forum.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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Ludovica Marchi has researched on the EU and Myanmar as a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics. Her research interests include the external relations of the European Union with a focus on the EU's pursuit of security policy cooperation. Her latest books are *Italy's Foreign Policy in the Twentieth-Century: A Contested Nature?* (Routledge 2015, co-edited) and *An EU Innovative External Action* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, edited).

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